

Two examples of class activities that I will periodically try on my classes are: (1) In my POSC 101 class (Intro to American Political Institutions), when covering the Constitution, Federalist Papers and Madisonian checks and balances, I will break up the class into different groups/teams of 3-4. I have them imagine the following scenario: Aliens have landed on Earth, specifically in the United States. They are malevolent beings and do not have our interests at heart. However, they are willing to conduct a political experiment with us. They will occupy two of the three branches of gov't, work within the confines of the Constitution, but to use these two branches to advance their alien interests. They will allow us human Americans the choice of which remaining 3rd branch gets to remain in human hands. Each student group has been appointed as part of a special commission to select the branch of gov't., and then draft a report explaining and justifying the selected branch. They are to cite the powers of their selected branch, while also citing the limits of the other two branches, hence, helping to justify the choice of the commission. I require the students to write down notes, appoint a recording secretary, while they collectively work on the draft report. I also have each team appoint a spokesperson to announce and share their choice to the other groups. When every group has completed their reports, I then resume the lecture format and list all the modern challenges to checks and balances. I also convey to them that benign interests versus malevolent interests are not as cut and dry as evil aliens versus humans, and that there is a lot of nuance and murky lines between what is considered good policy and bad policy, and that controlling all branches of gov't., much less different parties controlling different branches of gov't., does not inherently insure a smooth governing process.

(2) Another example comes from my POSC 100 course (Intro to Political Science). When studying parliamentary systems and multi-party coalition governments, I break the class into different political parties – ranging from the mainstream center-left and center-right parties, a leftist socialist/green party, a right-wing nationalist party and a right-leaning libertarian party. Based on the size and weight of the parties, I have an “election” held in the class, votes will be generated and distributed to the various parties. Given that in a multi-party system, no one party will receive an absolute majority of the seats in a parliament needed to choose a prime minister and form an executive cabinet gov't. and, thus, be able to govern. This means that parties need to be able to negotiate with potentially compatible parties that also have a decent number of seats in the parliament, in terms of modifying their platforms and possibly combining their seats totals and forming a coalition gov't. Once I explain all this, I have all the groups go at it, going around the room, meeting up with other “parties,” negotiating, trying to form that coveted coalition. The first group of parties that announce a coalition big enough to form a governing majority earn extra credit points on their next exam. This activity is used to emphasize how compromise is often needed, at the expense of purity or one’s ideal set point. It is also used to convey just how difficult it is to compromise and meet other actors that do not see eye to eye on everything half way. I then stress to them that even when a coalition is formed, it might not last when real world politics and policy conflicts come into play, causing a rift in the coalition and, hence, having the governing majority end and potentially replaced with new elections.